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*Published in:*
Journal of Early Adolescence

*DOI:*
10.1177/0272431609342984

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*The Journal of Early Adolescence* 2010 30: 27 originally published online 24 August 2009

DOI: 10.1177/0272431609342984

Journal of Early Adolescence
30(1) 27–49

DOI: 10.1177/0272431609342984
http://jea.sagepub.com
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# Religious Group Relations Among Christian, Muslim and Nonreligious Early Adolescents in the Netherlands

**Maykel Verkuyten and Jochem Thijs**[1]

## Abstract

This study conducted among Christian, Muslim, and nonreligious early adolescents living in the Netherlands used intergroup theory for examining religious group evaluations. There was evidence for a religious group divide with a third of the Christian and nonreligious participants explicitly indicating negative feelings toward Muslims, and Muslim children having negative feelings toward Christians, nonbelievers, and Jews. Furthermore, the Muslim early adolescents had high religious in-group identification and higher identification was associated with more negative feelings toward nonbelievers and Jews. In addition, the results show that increased opportunities in school for contact between early adolescents from different religious and nonreligious groups contributes to more positive group relations. It is argued that the pattern of results is in agreement with an intergroup perspective in which the role of the broader social context and the concrete situation is taken into account.

## Keywords

religious groups, religious identification, school context

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There is a substantial body of research on intergroup relationships between children and early adolescents. The predominant focus in this research is either on gender differences or on racial and ethnic groups. In general, children have a more positive attitude toward their own gender and toward their racial or ethnic in-group compared to out-groups (see Bennett & Sani, 2004; Levy & Killen, 2008). Gender, race, and ethnicity are important social markers that define group identities and that can lead to intergroup tensions and conflicts. However, children's social world is structured by many other characteristics, including religion. Although there is research on children's understanding of religious beliefs and practices (see Harris & Koenig, 2006), very little is known about religious intergroup relations. This is unfortunate for at least two reasons. One is that religious differences can be of great importance to children's lives and religious groups are among the more salient buttresses of identity (Seul, 1999). The other is that questions of diversity are increasingly questions of religious diversity. In particular, Islam has emerged as the focus of immigration and diversity debates in Europe and is at the heart of what is perceived as a "crisis of multiculturalism" (Modood & Ahmad, 2007; Zolberg & Long, 1999).

This study is concerned with Christian, Muslim, and nonreligious early adolescents living in the Netherlands. Early adolescence is an important period for the development of group identities and intergroup attitudes (see Ruble et al., 2004). During this period children begin to identify more closely with, for example, their ethnic or racial group and they start to recognize the broader social implications of ethnic and racial group differences (Quintana, 1998). The present study focuses on early adolescents' feelings toward Muslims, Christians, Jews, and nonbelievers. Furthermore, the degree of religious group identification was examined, as was the association of identification with the children's feelings toward the various groups. In addition, it was examined whether the religious composition of the school class affects children's group evaluations. The theoretical basis for examining these issues is derived from social developmental work on intergroup relations.

## *Religious In-Group Evaluation and Identification*

Social psychology has a long tradition of examining individual's attitudes and behaviors toward their in-group and out-groups. These attitudes are typically examined in relation to group identification and the intergroup context. One of the most influential social psychological perspectives is Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This theory is increasingly being used to examine intergroup relations among children and early adolescents

(see Bennett & Sani, 2004; Levy & Killen, 2008), and Social Identity Development Theory (SIDT) has been proposed by Nesdale (2008). Nesdale argued that group evaluations emerge depending on, first, the extent to which children identify with their social group, second, the norms and beliefs held by the members of the child's social group, and, third, the extent to which the out-group is perceived as threatening one's group in some way.

According to SIDT, individuals seek to belong to groups that provide them with a secure and positive social identity and are motivated to maintain positive distinctiveness through intergroup comparisons. This tendency and motivation implies that people will tend to evaluate their in-group more positively than out-groups. Hence we expected that the different groups of participants (Christians, Muslims, and nonreligious) will evaluate their (non) religious in-group more positively than the different out-groups.

SIDT interprets group identification in terms of individual differences in the degree to which psychologically central and valued group memberships develop. Some children are more inclined than others to see themselves as a religious group member and to value their religious group membership. Children who feel highly committed to their group are inclined to act in terms of their group membership. Thus the tendency to evaluate the in-group positively is a function of the intensity of group identification. That means that we can expect that for the Christian and Muslim early adolescents, stronger religious group identification is associated with more positive feelings toward their religious in-group. We did not consider group identification of the nonreligious early adolescents because in the context of the Netherlands there is no single community of nonreligious people. Thus individuals can define themselves as being nonreligious but there is no clear community to identify with. The category of nonreligious people is significant for "outsiders" but it is not an organized community similar to Christians or Muslims.

## *Religious Out-Groups and Threat*

According to SIDT (Nesdale, 2008), not only group identification but also in-group norms and beliefs as well as the perception of out-group threat instigate children's prejudice. We did not examine these latter two conditions directly but used the Dutch intergroup context to derive specific hypotheses. Previous studies have shown that children tend to reproduce the social representations or societal discourses and shared beliefs about the nature of group differences. In a multinational study among 6-year-old children, for example, Bennett and colleagues found that out-group attitudes were influenced by the own nation's particular widespread beliefs about other nationalities.

(Bennett et al., 2004). Furthermore, Bar-Tal and Teichman (2005) have shown that in a societal context of group conflict, children as young as 4 years absorb negative messages about out-groups and report fear when viewing drawings of out-group members.

In the last 7 to 8 years in the Netherlands, Islam has increasingly become the "negative other." In the Dutch media, Islam has become symbolic for problems related to ethnic minorities and immigration (see Ter Wal, 2004) and influential politicians have defined Islam as a backward religion and Muslims as a "fifth column," and have argued that "a cold war against Islam is unavoidable" (see Verkuyten & Zaremba, 2005). Hence according to some commentators there is an ongoing "Dutch-Muslim" cultural war (Scroggins, 2005). Research has shown that half of the Dutch general population (Pew Research Center, 2005) and of Dutch middle adolescents have explicit negative attitudes toward Muslims. These attitudes are strongly related to perceived threat to Dutch identity and culture (Velasco González, Verkuyten, Weesie, & Poppe, 2008). Muslims are typically considered to undermine traditional Dutch values and norms. The Netherlands is one of the most secular countries in the world (Te Grotenhuis & Scheepers, 2001) but it also has a Christian history and Christian values and beliefs remain present in many spheres of live. Thus it can be expected that Christian and nonreligious early adolescents will have more negative feelings toward Muslims compared to other (non)religious out-groups.

The societal emphasis on the need to compel Islamic minority groups to assimilate implies that Islamic youth in the Netherlands face high levels of threat to their religious identity and the ability to maintain a valuable and distinctive identity. For example, early adolescents of Turkish background, who are predominantly Muslim, have been found to experience the highest level of peer discrimination (Verkuyten & Thijs, 2002). According to SIT, under identity threatening circumstances, people will try to maintain or restore a positive and distinct collective identity. Therefore, we expected that Muslim identity will be very important to most of the Muslim early adolescents. In addition, identity threat can lead to negative feelings toward out-groups (Rothgerber & Worchel, 1997). To enhance the value and distinctiveness of one's own religious group, group members can derogate other religious groups (Cairns, Kenworthy, Campbell, & Hewstone, 2006). Hence the feelings of the Muslim early adolescents toward Christians can be expected to be rather negative.

Two contrasting hypotheses about the role of religious group identification for the evaluation of the religious out-group (Christian or Muslim) can be formulated. Early adolescents with a strong group identification derive the most meaning from their religious group affiliations. This means that they can be expected to be sensitive to out-group threats. This leads to the

expectation that for the Christian and Muslim early adolescents higher group identification is associated with more negative feelings toward the religious out-group (Muslim or Christians). On the other hand, it can be argued that Christianity and Islam have many similarities and that religious group identification increases the respect and appreciation for fellow-believers. The shared religiosity might act as a kind of superordinate category that reduces negative out-group feelings, particularly for high group identifiers (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2007). This process of shared religiosity does not apply to nonreligious people.

## *Nonreligious Out-Group*

Religious belief is not so much about personal preferences or social conventions, but rather about convictions. It is concerned with the moral good and divine truth that is difficult to reconcile with moral and epistemic diversity. The observant believer believes that he or she is right and will find it difficult to have positive feelings toward nonbelievers who implicitly challenge his or her religious life. In a study in Rotterdam, around 45% of Muslim adolescents indicated that they had "no sympathy" for nonbelievers (Phalet & Güngör, 2004). Similarly, 31% of Christian youth were found to have unfavorable views about nonbelievers. Hence it is likely that the feelings of Christian and Muslim early adolescents toward nonbelievers will be rather negative, especially for high religious in-group identifiers. Thus for the Christian and Muslim participants we expected religious group identification to be negatively associated with the feelings toward nonbelievers.

## *Jewish Out-Group*

SIDT (Nesdale, 2008) argued that not only out-group threat can underlie children's group evaluations but also in-group norms and beliefs that promote out-group rejection or acceptance (see also Abrams & Rutland, 2008). In real-life situations perceived out-group threat and in-group norms and beliefs are often confounded. Hence it is not easy to draw conclusions about the role of these norms and beliefs in addition to threat. A possible solution is to examine the attitude toward a religious out-group that does not present a threat to the position and identity of the in-group, like the Jews. The Jewish community in the Netherlands is very small, geographically dispersed, very well integrated, and not clearly visible in public life. Hence it is very likely that the early adolescents' feelings toward Jews are based on in-group norms and beliefs rather than on perceived threat.

We expected the feelings toward Jews to be quite negative among the Muslim children. In many European countries, including the Netherlands, there is a growing concern about increased anti-Semitism, which certainly is not only limited to Islamic groups but which has also been manifest in, for example, Mosques across Europe and among Muslim youth (Anti-Semitism Research, 2002; Schoenfeld, 2004). This concern is further illustrated by the many books, Web sites, and school initiatives that find it necessary to argue that Islam actually denounces anti-Semitism. One source for this anti-Semitism is the ongoing conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, and between observant Muslims and observant Jews in particular (Kaplan & Small, 2006). For some Muslims, the Jews form a "negative other" and there are indications that Dutch Muslim children reproduce the negative beliefs about Jews that exist in parts of the Muslim community (Kleijwegt & Van Weezel, 2006). Hence we expected Muslim early adolescents to reproduce these unfavorable beliefs and to have rather negative feelings toward Jews. These feelings were expected to be strongest among the high group identifiers.

For the Christian early adolescents the situation is different. Their religious identity is not challenged by the Jews and anti-Jewish sentiments are not common in mainstream Dutch society. This implies that the religious norms of acceptance and tolerance are more likely to guide children's out-group reactions. Thus Christian early adolescents were expected to have more positive feelings toward Jews than the Muslim children.

## *School Composition and Contact*

In their meta-analytical examination of the role of intergroup contact in predicting children's intergroup attitudes, Tropp and Prenevost (2008) concluded that contact promotes positive intergroup attitudes. In general, contact appears to improve group relations even when Allport's (1954) optimal conditions are not fulfilled (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Having frequent contact with out-group members may increase liking and positive affect via mere exposure (Bornstein, 1989). Through frequent contact children can acquire out-group knowledge, correct negative stereotypes, and develop sympathies. Among Dutch adolescents, for example, more contact with Muslims turns out to be related to less anti-Muslim feelings (Velasco González et al., 2008).

A school class is a social context in which contact with classmates is inevitable. However, school classes differ in the opportunities for intergroup contact. Various studies have examined the effect of classroom composition on intergroup attitudes and friendships. In the context of the United States, Quillian and Campbell (2003), for example, found that cross-race friendships

increase with school racial diversity and Moody (2001) showed that friendship segregation declines at highest levels of diversity. In the Netherlands, Verkuyten and Thijs (2000) found a similar result for intergroup attitudes and ethnic diversity in schools. Thus more opportunities for interreligious contact in school classes can be expected to be related to more positive feelings toward religious and nonreligious out-groups. We tested this expectation by examining whether the proportion of classmates of a particular out-group has a positive effect on the evaluation of that out-group.

### *In Summary*

The aim of this study is to examine religious group relations among Christian, Muslim, and nonreligious early adolescents living in the Netherlands. We expected, first, that the three groups of participants will favor their in-group over the out-groups and that for the Christian and Muslim participants higher group identification is positively related to in-group evaluation. Second, and considering the intergroup context in the Netherlands, we expected Muslim children to be rather negative toward Christians and nonbelievers and the latter two groups of participants to be rather negative toward Muslims. Furthermore, we examined whether in-group identification was associated with the evaluation of these out-groups. Third, Jews were expected to be evaluated more negatively by the Muslim participants than by the Christians and higher Muslim identification was expected to be associated with a stronger negative attitude. Fourth, in line with the contact hypothesis, we expected that a higher proportion of classmates of a particular religious out-group is positively related to the evaluation of that out-group.

## Method

### *Participants and Procedure*

Participants were 1,064 Grade 5 and 6 students from 24 regular primary schools in a medium-sized town in the west of the Netherlands. They completed a short questionnaire in their classrooms. Participation was voluntary and anonymity was guaranteed. All children were willing to participate in the study. In the present analyses, we included all participants who self-identified as either Christian ($n$ = 300), Muslim[1] ($n$ = 141), or nonreligious ($n$ = 570). These 1,011 students visited 48 self-contained classes with an average size of 22.17 students. Their mean age was 11.01 years ($SD$ = .79), and 45.2% were female.[2]

## Measures

*Religious group membership and religious classroom composition*. Students' religious group membership was assessed by means of self-definition. To examine the differences between Christian, Muslim, and nonreligious students, three dummy variables were calculated for each respondent group (coded "1" for that group and "0" for the other groups). As described below, multilevel analyses were used. These revealed that a significant portion of the variation in the group dummies was at the class level (17.8% for Christians, 21.4% for Muslims, and 25.1% for nonreligious people, $p_s < .001$). This indicates that classrooms differed in religious composition. Thus for each classroom ($n = 48$) we calculated the proportion of Christian students ($\bar{X} = .28$, $SD = .21$, Range = 0-.79), Muslim students ($\bar{X} = .14$, $SD = .19$, Range = 0-.71), and nonreligious students ($\bar{X} = .56$, $SD = .26$, Range = 0-1). The first two measures were not significantly related ($r = -.27$, $p > .05$). However, the proportion of nonreligious students showed strong and significant negative relations with the proportions of Christian and Muslim students (respectively, $r = -.58$ and $r = -.62$, $p_s < .001$).

*Religious identification*. Religious identification (for Christian and Muslim participants) was assessed with three items that are typically used in social psychological measures of in-group identification (e.g., Verkuyten & Thijs, 2000): "How important is your religion to you?" "Are you proud of your religion?" and "Do you sometimes get angry when people do not respect your religion?" Answers were rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*Not at all*/*No*, *certainly not*) to 5 (*Very important*/ *Yes*, *certainly*). For both Christians and Muslims the items loaded on one component explaining, respectively, 70.6% and 69.2% of the variance. Cronbach's alpha was .79 for the Christian participants and .75 for the Muslim participants.

*Religious group evaluations*. Students' evaluations of, respectively, Christians, Jews, Muslims, and nonbelievers were assessed with so-called "feeling thermometers." The feeling thermometer has been used as a global measure of in-group and out-group feelings among members of different ethnic and religious groups (e.g., Cairns et al., 2006; Verkuyten, 2005; Wolsko, Park, & Judd, 2006). For each target group, the thermometer ran from 0 degrees to 100 degrees. Students were instructed that 100 degrees indicates very positive or warm feelings, 0 degrees indicates very cold or negative feelings, and 50 degrees means neutral feelings. Following this instruction, four religious groups were listed in the following order: Christians, Muslims, Jews, and nonbelievers. Under each target group a scale was presented running from 0 to 100.

### *Data Analytic Strategy*

In the Netherlands, primary school children spend their days in the same class with the same classmates. As respondents were nested within school classes, their individual responses were probably not statistically independent. For this reason, we used multilevel analyses to properly estimate the effects of the classroom composition measures and religious identification. To simultaneously examine students' evaluations of the different religious groups multivariate multilevel models were tested (see Goldstein, 1995; Snijders & Bosker, 1999) using MLwiN version 2.0 (Rasbash, Browne, Healy, Cameron, & Charlton, 2004). In these models, three levels were specified: Level 1 was included to define the multivariate structure and pertained to the different evaluations by individual students, Level 2 concerns differences within classes, and Level 3 concerns differences between classes. All models were estimated using the Iterative Generalized Least Squares algorithm, and relative model improvement was assessed by comparing the fit (deviance) of nested models. Differences between these statistics follow a chi-square distribution with degrees of freedom given by the difference in parameters (Snijders & Bosker, 1999).

Prior to examining the multilevel models, we conducted repeated measures analyses to test our hypothesis that each group of participants favored the in-group over the out-groups. To account for the multilevel structure of our data, the evaluation measures were corrected for mean differences between classes. That is to say, the repeated measures analyses were performed on the pooled within-classes covariance matrix.

## Results

### *Group Evaluations*

Table 1 shows statistics for the four group evaluations reported by the three groups of early adolescents. It can be seen that the large majority of participants reported positive feelings toward their own group (ratings > 50), and this held for Muslims in particular. Furthermore, Muslim participants reported negative feelings toward the out-groups (ratings < 50). Almost half of these students was explicitly negative about Jews and a third indicated negative feelings toward Christians. In turn, almost a third of the Christians and of the nonbelievers were negative toward Muslims.

To examine whether participants preferred their in-group over the out-groups, repeated measures analyses (with target group as a within-subject

**Table 1.** Percentages, Mean Scores, and Standard Deviations for the Thermometer-Ratings of the Four Religious Groups by the Three Groups of Participants

| | Thermometer-Ratings | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 0-40 (Negative; %) | 50 (Neutral; %) | 60-100 (Positive; %) | $\bar{X}$ | *SD* |
| Christians (*N* = 300) | | | | | |
| Christians | 5.0 | 13.7 | 81.3 | 80.03 | 20.89 |
| Jews | 14.3 | 23.7 | 62.0 | 66.77 | 25.22 |
| Muslims | 29.7 | 25.0 | 45.3 | 57.04 | 27.29 |
| Nonbelievers | 17.0 | 27.0 | 56.0 | 63.90 | 26.95 |
| Muslims (*N* = 141) | | | | | |
| Christians | 32.6 | 13.5 | 53.9 | 57.62 | 26.98 |
| Jews | 48.9 | 15.6 | 35.5 | 43.51 | 30.98 |
| Muslims | 1.4 | 2.1 | 96.5 | 94.37 | 13.83 |
| Nonbelievers | 25.5 | 23.4 | 51.1 | 58.18 | 30.79 |
| Nonreligious (*N* = 570) | | | | | |
| Christians | 15.6 | 30.2 | 54.2 | 63.24 | 25.44 |
| Jews | 22.5 | 29.3 | 48.2 | 59.37 | 26.46 |
| Muslims | 32.5 | 25.8 | 41.8 | 54.11 | 27.06 |
| Nonbelievers | 4.7 | 22.1 | 73.2 | 75.89 | 23.24 |

factor) were performed separately for each group of participants on the pooled within-classes covariance matrix. For each group, we tested the contrasts between the in-group and each of the three out-groups. To reduce the chance of Type 1 errors, significance levels were multiplied by four. Results clearly demonstrated a preference for the in-group among all groups of participants: Christian early adolescents evaluated Christians more positive than Jews, $F(1, 299) = 10.17$, Muslims, $F(1, 299) = 45.23$, and nonbelievers, $F(1, 299) = 53.12$, $p_s < .01$; Muslim early adolescents evaluated Muslims more positive than Christians, $F(1, 141) = 109.16$, Jews $F(1, 141) = 96.24$, and nonbelievers, $F(1, 141) = 64.16$, $p_s < .01$; and nonreligious early adolescents evaluated nonbelievers more positive than Christians, Muslims, and Jews, respectively, $F(1, 569) = 27.89$, $F(1, 569) = 30.04$, $p_s < .01$, and $F(1, 569) = 8.00$, $p < .05$.

## *Variance Distributions and Group Differences*

Before we examined the effects of classroom composition and religious identification, two preliminary multilevel analyses were conducted. First, we examined the variance distributions of the four group evaluations across

Level 2 (within classes) and Level 3 (between classes).[3] We specified a multivariate model with intercepts only (Model 0). For each dependent variable, this model provided an estimate of the intraclass correlation coefficient ($\rho$), which represents the proportion of variance at Level 3 (Snijders & Bosker, 1999). For all variables this coefficient was significant at $p < .001$: $\rho$ was .086 for evaluations of Christians, .091 for evaluations of Jews, .264 for evaluations of Muslims, and .078 for evaluations of nonbelievers. Thus classes differed with respect to the average group evaluations reported by their students, particularly for the evaluations of Muslims.

Second, we tested mean differences in evaluations between the three groups of early adolescents. To this aim, we estimated a multivariate regression model with dummy variables representing the three different groups. This model fitted the data significantly better than the intercept-only model, $\chi^2(12) = 558.86$, $p < .001$. Results are shown in the left part of Table 2. In this model (Model 1), dummy variables are included for Christian (1) versus other (0), and Muslim (1) versus other (0) early adolescents. This means that nonreligious children are the referent group. Mean levels for this group are indicated by the constants in Model 1.[4]

It appeared that Christian early adolescents rated Christians and Jews, respectively, 15.75 and 6.44 points more positively, and nonbelieving people 9.70 points less positively than nonreligious participants. The evaluation of Muslims was similar for both groups. In addition, Muslim early adolescents evaluated Christians, Jews, and nonbelievers more negatively (9.29, 19.19, and 17.23 points, respectively) but Muslims more positively than nonreligious participants (34.39 points). Differences between Christian and Muslim early adolescents cannot be directly inferred from Table 2. However, they can be obtained by subtracting the effects of Muslims (vs. nonreligious) from those of Christians (vs. nonreligious). Compared to Muslim participants, Christian early adolescents rated Christians, Jews, and nonbelievers more positively (respectively, 25.03 and 25.63 points, $p < .001$, and 7.53 points, $p < .01$) and Muslims less positively (31.07 points, $p < .001$).

## *Classroom Proportions*

Next, we examined whether students' evaluations of Christians, Muslims, and nonreligious people depended on the actual presence of these groups in their classroom, that is, the proportion of the target group.[5] To test our hypothesis concerning the role of contact opportunity, three interaction terms were calculated. For each group that was evaluated (except the Jews) we multiplied the corresponding classroom proportion measure (a Level 3 variable) with the

**Table 2.** Multilevel Regression Models 1 and 2 for Religious Group Evaluations

| | Model 1 | | | | Model 2 | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Christians | Jews | Muslims | Non-R | Christians | Jews | Muslims | Non-R |
| Constant | 63.27*** | 59.28*** | 53.81*** | 75.28*** | 61.46*** | 58.48*** | 51.27*** | 73.38** |
| Level 2 Predictors | | | | | | | | |
| Christian (vs. Non-R.) | 15.75*** | 6.44** | 3.32 | −9.70*** | 17.10*** | 7.45*** | 3.45 | −18.30** |
| Muslim (vs. Non-R) | −9.29*** | −19.19*** | 34.39*** | −17.23*** | −6.32* | −16.10*** | 30.55*** | −22.64** |
| Level 3 Predictor | | | | | | | | |
| Proportion Target Group (PTG) | — | — | — | — | 4.63 | — | 19.61** | 22.41** |
| Cross-Level Interaction | | | | | | | | |
| Ingroup[a] * PTG | — | — | — | — | −2.96 | — | 7.90 | −19.04* |
| Variance | | | | | | | | |
| Level 2, student (% explained) | 554.34 (9%) | 663.95 (5%) | 568.46 (12%) | 629.41(3%) | 554.51 (9%) | 663.29 (5%) | 568.45 (12%) | 627.35 (3%) |
| Level 3, class (% explained) | 46.52 (19%) | 58.35 (16%) | 105.54 (54%) | 22.50 (59%) | 44.08 (23%) | 57.89 (17%) | 82.21 (65%) | 8.30 (85%) |
| Deviance | 36185.93 | | | | 36148.43 | | | |

Note: There is no variance at Level 1. Non-R = Nonreligious.

a. Christians (1) versus other (0) for Christians, Muslims (1) versus other (0) for Muslims, Nonreligious (1) versus other (0) for Nonreligious.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

Level 2 dummy representing the matching participant group (e.g., for the Christian target group we calculated the interaction between the proportion of Christian students and the dummy variable representing the Christian vs. the other participants). As a consequence, when the proportion measures and the dummy interactions were simultaneously added to the model, the "main" effects of target proportion represented the effect of out-group presence (e.g., the proportion of Christians for Muslim and nonreligious respondents). Model 2 (Table 2) is the model in which these three interactions and the three proportion measures are included. Overall, the model with classroom proportions was a significant improvement over Model 1 (the model without these predictors), $\chi^2(6) = 37.5$, $p < .001$.

The proportion of Christian classmates did not affect Muslim and nonreligious early adolescents' evaluations of Christians. However, with respect to the evaluations of both Muslims and nonreligious people, there were significant effects of out-group proportions. Thus in classes with more Muslim students, both Christians and nonreligious early adolescents were more positive about Muslims ($b = 19.61$, a raise of almost 2 evaluations points with each .10 point raise in proportion ). Likewise, Christian and Muslim early adolescents evaluated nonbelieving people more positively when they had more nonreligious classmates ($b = 22.41$). As can be inferred from Table 2, target group proportion and its interaction with the group dummy explained 11% of additional between-classroom variance in the evaluation of Muslims and 26% of additional classroom variance in the evaluation of nonreligious people.

Further inspection of Model 2 revealed that the Muslim early adolescents no longer evaluated nonreligious people more negatively than the Christian participants ($p > .05$) when the influence of target group proportion was partialled out. Furthermore, a $t$ test revealed that the Muslim participants had less nonreligious classmates compared to the Christian children, $t(439) = -3.903$, $p < .001$. Thus the different evaluation of the nonreligious target group by Muslim and Christian early adolescents was accounted for by the representation of that group in the classroom.

## *Religious Identification*

In a last set of analyses, we examined the role of religious identification. Because identification was not measured among the nonreligious children, these analyses focused on the Christian and Muslim participants ($n = 441$). To allow the testing of more parsimonious models, data were transformed in three manners. First, the four group evaluations were converted into one measure for in-group evaluation and three measures for out-group evaluation.

The latter involved two religious out-groups (Muslims for Christians and Christians for Muslims, and Jews for both groups of participants) and one nonbelieving out-group. Second, two measures were computed representing the proportion of in-group classmates (Christians for Christians and Muslims for Christians) and the proportion of classmates from the religious out-group (Muslims for Christians and Christians for Muslims). Note that these measures were Level 2 variables that varied for different students within classes. Third, both religious identification and the four evaluations were transformed into *z*-scores to make meaningful comparisons of the effects of the former on the latter. To examine whether the effects of religious identification differed for the Christian and Muslim early adolescents, we computed an interaction term. Prior to this calculation, the dummies were centered at their means. Thus the effects of identification could be interpreted as proper main effects.

Two models were tested (Models 3a and 3b). In Model 3a, group evaluations were regressed on participant group (Christian vs. Muslim), religious identification, the interaction between religious identification and participant group, and in Model 3b we added the proportion of target group students in the classroom (not included for the Jewish out-group). Note that for the in-group and religious out-group evaluations, the proportion of the target group was a Level 2 rather than a Level 3 variable. Separate regression coefficients were estimated for each evaluation.

First, in a model (3a) without the proportion of target group there was a significant interaction effect between religious group and religious identification. It turned out that for the Muslim participants, higher identification was related to a less positive evaluation of the Christian out-group ($b = -.212$, $p < .05$), whereas for the Christian participants, higher religious identification was associated with a more positive evaluation of the Muslims ($b = .136$, $p < .05$).

This interaction effect was no longer significant, however, in Model 3b that included the proportion of the target group. Separate regression coefficients were estimated for each evaluation. Model 3b is shown in Table 3. For all evaluations, except that of the Jewish out-group, the effects of identification were similar across participant group. Compared to low-identifiers, students who strongly identified with their religious in-group reported more positive feelings toward their in-group, similar feelings toward their Muslim or Christian out-group, and less positive feelings toward nonbelievers. In addition, with respect to the evaluation of Jews, religious identification had no effect for Christian participants but, as expected, a negative effect for the Muslim children ($b = -278$, $p < .05$). This latter effect was also found in model 3a that did not correct for the proportion of the target group.

**Table 3.** Multilevel Regression Model 3b for Religious in- and Out-Group Evaluations

| | In-Group | Religious Out-Group[a] | Jewish Out-Group | Nonreligious Out-Group |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Predictors | | | | |
| Christian (vs. Muslim)[b] | –.487*** | –.009 | .529*** | –.121 |
| Religious identification | .200** | –.061 | –.167* | –.253** |
| Christian * identification | .210 | .240 | .374** | .095 |
| Proportion target group | .163 | 1.009*** | — | .549** |
| Variance | | | | |
| Level 2, student (% explained) | .746 (4%) | .919 (1%) | .771 (8%) | .919 (4%) |
| Level 3, class (% explained) | .047 (79%) | .031 (59%) | .080 (54%) | .000 (100%) |
| Deviance | | 4339.38 | | |

Note: There is no variance at Level 1. All dependent variables and Religious Identification are standardized. Proportion Target Group is a Level 2 predictor for In-Group and Religious Out-Group, and a Level 3 predictor for Nonreligious Out-Group. All other predictors are at Level 2.
a. Muslims for Christian respondents, and Christians for Muslim Respondents.
b. Dummy variable with "1" for Christians and "0" for Muslims.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.

## Discussion

Using social identity (development) theory (Nesdale, 2008; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), we have examined religious group identification and feelings toward multiple religious groups and nonreligious people among a large sample of early adolescents in the Netherlands. The results suggests that there is a Dutch-Muslim divide, similar to what is observed in Dutch society in general (Sniderman & Hagendoorn, 2007). Around a third of the Muslim early adolescents explicitly indicated to have negative feelings toward Christians and one in four had negative feelings toward nonbelievers. In contrast, the Christian and nonreligious participants had the least positive feelings toward Muslims with around a third indicating to have negative feelings. Thus many children reported explicit negative feelings and these reactions differ from the great majority of research on children's intergroup attitudes that typically find in-group preference and not out-group dislike (Nesdale, 2001).

These findings are probably related to the intergroup situation in the Netherlands in which Muslims are portrayed as undermining Dutch culture and identity. Dutch adolescents have been found to perceive Muslims as a threat and this perception underlies prejudice toward Muslims (Velasco Gonzalez et al., 2008). In addition, the public condemnation of Islam and pleas for

assimilation (see Verkuyten & Zaremba, 2005) forces Dutch Muslims in a position of having to defend and stress the importance of their religion and religious group. Islamic immigrant groups face high levels of threat to the value of their religious identity that can lead to increased in-group orientation and identification among members of these groups (Peek, 2005). As expected, all groups of early adolescents had more positive feelings toward their in-group than the out-groups but the in-group feelings of the Muslims were the most positive ones. Furthermore, Muslim early adolescents had higher religious in-group identification than Christian contemporaries. The intergroup situation can also lead to less positive attitudes toward out-groups (Rothgerber & Worchel, 1997). To enhance the value and distinctiveness of one's Muslim group, group members can keep a distance toward or derogate other religious groups (Cairns et al., 2006). Hence the findings suggest that in an identity threatening context social identity needs (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) rather than religious norms of tolerance and acceptance drive early adolescents' evaluations of religious out-groups.

Social identity development theory (Nesdale, 2008) argues that out-group evaluations depend not only on perceived out-group threat but also on in-group norms and beliefs that promote out-group rejection or acceptance. A central teaching of religions is that one should accept and love others, including those that think and act differently. This normative orientation is an important guideline for perception and behavior when one identifies with one's religious group. However, religious belief is also about convictions and is difficult to reconcile with moral and epistemic diversity. Nonbelievers implicitly challenge one's way of life particularly for high religious group identifiers because they derive the most meaning from their religious group affiliations. It turned out that Christian as well as Muslim early adolescents who identified strongly with their religious in-group were more negative toward nonbelievers than early adolescents with a weak religious group identification. Hence the religious norm of acceptance and tolerance did not involve people who are not religious.

The role of in-group norms and beliefs is also important for understanding the Muslim early adolescents' feelings toward Jews. In the Netherlands, the Jewish community is very small and does not form a group threat. However, almost half of the Muslim participants was explicitly negative toward Jews. In addition, Muslim early adolescents who identified more strongly with their religious in-group were more negative toward Jews. In the Netherlands, as in other West European countries, there is a concern about increased anti-Semitism among Muslim youth (Anti-Semitism Research, 2002; Schoenfeld, 2004). And there are some indications that Muslim children reproduce the negative

attitudes toward Jews that exist in parts of the Muslim community (Kleijwegt & Van Wezel, 2006). The current findings point in the same direction.

Religious group feelings did not only depend on individual differences in, for example, in-group identification. Independently and for all target groups, there were also systematic differences between school classes. This means that in addition to individual differences children in the same classes are more similar in their group feelings than children in different classes. The class level accounted for around 9% of the total variance in feelings toward nonbelievers, Christians, and Jews and explained no less than 26% of the variance in feelings toward Muslims. This indicates that school classes matter for children's religious group feelings and they matter particularly strong for the feelings toward Muslims.

The current findings show that increased opportunity for contact between early adolescents from different religious and nonreligious groups contributes to positive group relations. Christian and nonreligious early adolescents had more positive feelings toward Muslims when the proportion of that out-group in class was higher. In addition, Christian and Muslim participants with more nonreligious classmates were found to evaluate nonbelieving people more positively. Furthermore, the Christian and Muslim early adolescents evaluated the nonreligious group similarly when the proportion of nonbelieving classmates was taken into account.

These results show that the positive effects of contact opportunities are not restricted to ethnic or racial groups (e.g., Moody, 2001; Quillian & Campbell, 2003) who are the focus of most of the contact research and also not to children who belong to the dominant majority in society. Thus the results contribute to the generality of contact theory. However, it also turned out that the proportion of Christian children in the class did not have an effect. This may be due to the fact that Christian identity is less uniform because of different denominations (e.g., Catholics, Protestants) and less visible for early adolescence than, for example, Muslim identity. Furthermore, we focused on the opportunities for contact and did not consider actual contacts. Religious heterogeneous schools may still be substantially segregated along religious lines. We were not able to examine the role that the proportion of Jewish classmates plays in the attitude of the Muslim early adolescents. However, it is likely that increased exposure of Muslim adolescents to Jewish classmates will increase positive feelings toward Jews, depending on the way that the contact is presented and organized. In the context of widespread negative beliefs, mere exposure might confirm existing stereotypes and negative attitudes rather than increase out-group knowledge and positive affect (Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005).

To summarize, we have examined attitudes toward religious groups among Christian, Muslim, and nonreligious early adolescents. The findings show that there is a clear group divide between Muslims early adolescents, on the one hand, and Christians and nonbelievers, on the other hand. This suggests that children tend to reproduce societal discourses and widespread beliefs (Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005, Bennett et al., 2004) like the ongoing "Dutch-Muslim cultural war" (Scroggins, 2005). In addition, however, the findings show that the classroom context has a substantial influence on children's attitudes. Thus it is not only the broader social context that is important but also the concrete situation in which children find themselves in.

## *Limitations*

In evaluating the present results some qualifications should be considered. For example, we used an intergroup perspective and this assumes that students (explicitly or implicitly) recognized religious orientation as a meaningful way to group their classmates and that they were aware of each other's religious background. This assumption is likely considering the current debates on Islam and religion more generally and the fact that most schools teach about religions and religious differences. Furthermore, results showed that there were relatively strong effects for classroom composition. For the Christian and Muslim early adolescents, religious identification had an effect on out-group evaluation (Muslim for Christians and Christians for Muslims) when the proportion of out-group classmates was not included as a predictor. The presence of Christian or Muslim out-group classmates did matter for the evaluation of the Christian or Muslim out-group and the findings for the classroom level suggests that the early adolescents did recognize religious orientations.

However, it should be noted that early adolescents' attitudes will not only depend on the intergroup setting but also on, for example, parental attitudes, both directly and indirectly. Children can internalize the beliefs and attitudes that parents express in verbal and nonverbal ways, including widespread negative beliefs such as about Jews in some Muslim communities and about Muslims in the Netherlands (e.g., Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005; Bennett et al., 2004; Velasco Gonzalez et al., 2008). Parents can also have a more indirect influence on their children's attitude by, for example, their choice to send their child to a religious homogenous or rather diverse school. That would mean that other factors that vary along with classroom composition might explain the classroom-level differences found. This alternative explanation is not very likely in the current study because classrooms within

schools varied in religious composition.[6] However, future studies should examine parental influences more systematically and in relation to intergroup factors.

There are some other limitations that should be mentioned. For example, no measures of perceived out-group threat, of in-group norms and beliefs, and of actual intergroup contacts or friendships were available. Furthermore, we focused on general group feelings, but these feelings can differ from attitudes toward individual classmates from different religious groups. In addition, only 48 classrooms were considered and there was no information available on religious teaching in the different schools. Religious identification was measured with items that are commonly used in social psychological research. However, it seems important to examine different dimensions of religious identity in future studies, such as religious beliefs, behaviors, and practices. For example, the degree to which adolescents subscribe to the religious concepts of acceptance and tolerance could be assessed. It is possible that for other dimensions, religious group identification plays a different role in intergroup relations. Furthermore, future studies could examine religious group attitudes among other religious minority groups (e.g., Hindus, Jews) as well as different groups of Christians and Muslims (e.g., Sunni, Alevi) living in the Netherlands. In addition, it would be interesting to examine these issues in other European and non-European countries. The Netherlands is one of the most secular countries in the world (Te Grotenhuis & Scheepers, 2001) and European nations differ in their historical and current approaches for dealing with religious and cultural diversity. Furthermore, in most European countries there is a long history of an established majority group, and issues stemming from immigration, migrant minorities, and diversity are relatively novel. In contrast, countries such as Canada and the United States are largely composed of immigrants and (in part) cultural diversity is a defining characteristic of these nations. Furthermore, countries such as the United States are much more religious than the Netherlands.

## *Practical Implications*

The main practical implication of our findings relates to the school context. The classroom context appears to have a substantial influence on children's attitudes, explaining, for example, no less than 26% of the feelings toward Muslims. This means that the educational context offers important possibilities for improving religious group relations. Schools in the Netherlands are trying to make a contribution to more positive group relations in many different ways. They consider the classroom composition, they try to teach

children basic aspects of democracy, citizenship and tolerance, and they use forms of multicultural education. Schools differ considerably in their approach and it is unclear which approach is most effective. What *is* clear, however, is that schools can make a real difference. Future studies should examine more closely why and which aspects of the school context, the curriculum, and teaching practices actually make a difference for children's religious group attitudes.

## Notes

1. There live around 850,000 Muslims in The Netherlands (5% of the population). The number of Muslim pupils at schools differs greatly, ranging from schools that have no Muslim children to Islamic schools that have only Muslim pupils.
2. Gender was equally distributed across the three religious groups. The Muslim participants ($\bar{X}$ age = 11.26 years, $SD = .75$) were somewhat older than the Christian and nonreligious early adolescents (respectively, $\bar{X}$ age = 11.05 years, $SD = .84$, and $\bar{X}$ age = 10.92 years, $SD = .75$; $p < .05$ and $p < .01$). However, there were no unique relations between age and the four group evaluations. Therefore, age was not included in the analyses.
3. Variance calculations and proportion measures were based upon the religious self-definition of all 1,064 students who participated in the research.
4. Constants in Model 2 do not directly indicate mean levels for nonreligious participants because target group proportions are included.
5. We could not investigate this with respect to Jewish people. There were only five Jewish students in the sample making it meaningless to compute a proportion measure for this group.
6. The classrooms within schools varied in religious composition. The within-school variation for the proportion Christians was 23%. For the nonbelievers this percentage was 17%, and for the Muslims it was 11%.

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